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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA, NEA/I, S/I, PRM, AMBASSADOR FOLEY

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SUBJECT: Jordan Exempts Departing Iraqis From Fees; Introduces New Visa Procedures

REFS: A) Amman 532
B) Amman 486

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11. (SBU) The Jordanian Ministry of Interior (MOI) announced February 13 it would fully exempt departing Iraqis from overstay fines, and would waive 50 percent of the fines for Iraqis who choose to stay in Jordan providing they correct/update their status by March 17, 2008, a date extended until April 17 in a subsequent announcement (ref B). In the initial announcement, MOI also confirmed that all Iraqis will need visas to enter Jordan, and that visa procedures "would be announced soon." The MOI said Iraqis located in Iraq would have to use courier service provider "TNT Express" for their applications, while those outside of Iraq would have to apply at Jordanian embassies.

Despite Announcement, Questions Remain

12. (SBU) In previous meetings with EmbOffs, Iraqi Ambassador to Jordan Saad Al-Hayani lamented that many Iraqis in Jordan could not afford to pay any overstay fees, and still feared being permanently banned from reentry to Jordan if they departed. Nevertheless, Iraqi DCM Muhammad Shabout told us on February 17 that the consular section received a high volume of inquiries about the MOI announcement from Iraqis interested in returning home. Shabout said he believed "a good number" of Iraqis would be willing to return now. Shabout also said the Iraqi Embassy had queried Baghdad about GOI plans to provide financial assistance to Iraqis returning home. Shabout further confirmed that the GOI had previously provided USD 800 per returning family.

13. (SBU) Iraqi Embassy officials told EconOffs that the Jordanian decision was still not clear to them, "as the main issue was [the GOJ's prior] placement of Iraqis on a permanent reentry ban, and not the fees." The Iraqi Embassy has requested further clarification from the MOI. MOI officials initially told EmbOffs that no permanent ban would be placed on those Iraqis departing Jordan who have been exempted from the overstay fees (ref B). During his February 18 briefing for the Amman diplomatic corps, UNHCR High Commissioner Antonio Guterres said that the GOJ told him their officers would cease placing the red-starred stamp, which precludes reentry, on passports of departing Iraqis unable to pay their overstay fines (ref A). Guterres described this move as an important symbolic gesture.

14. (SBU) COMMENT: Despite assurances that Iraqis departing Jordan

should not fear being permanently banned from reentering, unclear criteria for visa issuance and a track record of at-times arbitrary enforcement at the borders might deter many Iraqis from departing because there remain no guarantees they will be able to return to Jordan later. In any event, UNHCR and others who work closely with Iraqis believe that Iraqi refugees are better-informed about developments in Iraq than many government and international officials, and will make the decision to go home when conditions allow. END COMMENT.

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